United Nations A/73/278

General Assembly

Distr.: General
30 July 2018

Original: English

Seventy-third session
Item 70 of the provisional agenda*
Promotion and protection of the rights of children

Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

Summary

The present report is submitted to the General Assembly pursuant to its resolution 72/245 on the rights of the child, in which it requested the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to continue to submit reports to the Assembly on the activities undertaken in the fulfilment of her mandate and on the progress achieved in advancing the children and armed conflict agenda. The report covers the period from August 2017 to July 2018. It describes trends, issues of concern and progress made over the past year, including the mainstreaming of child protection issues within the United Nations system. It also provides information on the field visits of the Special Representative, on her engagement with regional organizations, civil society and international partners and on dialogue with parties to conflict. It outlines challenges and priorities in her agenda and concludes with a set of recommendations to enhance the protection of children affected by conflict.

* A/73/150.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 72/245, the General Assembly requested the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (the Special Representative) to continue to submit reports to it and the Human Rights Council on the activities undertaken in the fulfilment of her mandate, including information on her field visits, on progress achieved and challenges remaining on the children and armed conflict agenda. The request stemmed from the mandate given by the Assembly in its resolution 51/77, in which it recommended, inter alia, that the Special Representative raise awareness and promote the collection of information about the plight of children affected by armed conflict and foster international cooperation to ensure respect for children's rights in these situations.

2. In line with that mandate, and as requested by the Assembly in its resolution 72/245, the present report provides information on current trends regarding children affected by armed conflict and gives an overview of emerging issues and challenges, including on the cross-border nature of grave violations and the relationship between preventing violations of children's rights and the United Nations broader sustaining peace agenda. It also highlights the ongoing engagement with parties to conflict to end and prevent grave violations as well as efforts undertaken with a broad range of actors to raise global awareness and catalyse action on the issue. In the present report, reference is also made to steps taken by the Special Representative in response to the request contained in resolution 72/245 that she increase her engagement with States, United Nations bodies and agencies, regional organizations and, especially, subregional organizations and increase public awareness activities, including by collecting, assessing and disseminating best practices and lessons learned, in accordance with the existing mandate.

II. Taking stock of the children and armed conflict agenda

A. Overview of trends and challenges

3. Protracted conflicts, cyclical spikes in violence and cross-border operations by armed forces and groups continued to render children in situations of armed conflict vulnerable. Time and again, armed conflict stripped away layers of protection afforded by families, society and law, and boys and girls became victims as both the targets and the perpetrators of violence. As a result, widespread grave violations against children were documented in almost all situations relating to the children and armed conflict agenda.

4. During the reporting period, there were spikes in violence in a number of chronically instable areas leading to unspeakable violations against children. For instance, the attacks of 25 August 2017 against Myanmar police posts by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army in northern Rakhine State triggered an immediate response from Government forces. The ensuing outbreak of violence led to much killing, maiming and rape and other forms of sexual violence and the displacement of more than 720,000 persons across the border to Bangladesh. Similarly, in the Kasais, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an intensification of operations by armed groups resulted in a significant increase in the recruitment of children and their use in hostilities, in attacks against schools and in the number of children killed and injured, including during the Government's response to the security threat. A periodic intensification of conflict was also noted in other country situations on the agenda of the Special Representative, such as the Central African Republic and Somalia.

5. Data from the United Nations monitoring and reporting mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict indicate an increase in the number of verified cases for each of the six grave violations against children in 2017 compared with 2016. With an upsurge of more than 70 per cent, the trend was most pronounced for child abduction. In 2017 in Somalia alone, Al-Shabaab abducted more than 1,600 children with the primary objective of bolstering their ranks by using boys and girls in combat and support roles. Armed groups in other country situations also often relied on abduction as a modus operandi, forcing children to wage their conflicts. Some, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, often specifically targeted girls, who were raped, forced to become wives of their fighters or used to perpetrate suicide attacks. In February 2018, for instance, the group abducted 110 girls and one boy from a technical college in Dapchi, Yobe State, the majority of whom have since been released. Incidents of mass abduction also led families to send their children to safer areas or stop them from attending school, disrupting access to education, particularly in the case of girls.

6. The impact of conflict and the consequences of grave violations often reverberate long after the peaks of violence subside. Temporary displacement to elude localized violence often becomes a permanent condition and immediate challenges to secure adequate shelter, food and health care become chronic. Vulnerability is often further magnified in the case of children separated from their families or victims of conflict-related sexual violence, particularly girls caring for children conceived through rape, who are faced with severe health repercussions and stigmatization. Even when a physical return is possible, the traces of conflict often render a return to childhood impossible. The five-month siege of Marawi, in the Philippines, for instance, led to the destruction of more than 20 schools and thereby hindered the access of more than 22,000 children to education. Rebuilding educational infrastructure and ensuring the return of qualified teachers can take months or even years, leaving important educational gaps in the formative years of children.

7. Notwithstanding those challenges, the Special Representative and other child protection actors achieved important advances in strengthening the protection of children affected by armed conflict. Action plans and other bilateral commitments provided the main framework for engaging with parties to conflict, leading to the formal release of more than 10,000 children from their ranks[1] and the reintegration of more than 12,000 by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other child protection partners in 2017. In addition, the Special Representative and her Office launched joint initiatives focused on strengthening the prevention of grave violations, which opened new pathways to engage with parties to conflict.

B. Emerging issues and challenges

Increasing levels of cross-border violations

8. Violations including a cross-border dimension were a prominent feature of the reporting period, further increasing the complexity of prevention and response efforts. In that regard, children continued to be recruited or abducted by parties to conflict in one country and trafficked across borders to be used in combat or for rape and other forms of sexual exploitation. For instance, in 2017, the United Nations documented the recruitment of boys by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in and around Tripoli, Libya, who were subsequently trafficked by sea and land into the Syrian Arab Republic. Similarly, between July and October 2017, Boko Haram abducted 58 boys

[1] In addition, an unknown number of children left armed forces or groups through informal pathways.

and 32 girls during raids on villages across the borders of Nigeria with Cameroon and Niger. Similar cases were also documented in other countries.

9. In other instances, boys and girls travelled with their families or caregivers into war zones and, upon arrival, were often separated from them and drawn into the conflict surrounding them. In Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, a significant number of women and children accompanied fighters seeking to support the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and many of them were still in those countries at the time of writing. In Iraq, an estimated 1,200 children of different nationalities have reportedly been detained by the Government, including on terrorism-related charges. In the Syrian Arab Republic, more than 1,300 children are reportedly being held by Kurdish actors in different sites across the north-east of the country, often because of their alleged association with foreign fighters.

10. The already severe protection concerns regarding children living in conflict zones are often further magnified when boys and girls are recruited across borders. Not only are they exposed to the dangers of frontline service and used to support armed struggles in other ways, but they are stripped of support networks usually afforded by families or friends and may not be able to speak the local language and thus lack the ability to communicate basic needs. Children fighting in a foreign country who flee from armed forces or groups face significantly higher barriers than do nationals to escaping violence and rejoining their families. Bereft of any support structure, faced with exclusion and an unknown context, such children are often stranded in hostile territories and particularly vulnerable to re-recruitment, sexual violence, slavery or trafficking.

11. Cross-border recruitment and the use of children is a prevalent modus operandi for groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army, Boko Haram and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Governments faced with armed groups, the strategies of which include inflicting maximum suffering on civilians, may be tempted to apply different legal standards from those applying to such heinous acts. It is, particularly in contexts where Governments are engaged in operations to counter violent extremism, more important than ever to uphold the principle that children formerly associated with armed groups should be seen primarily as victims. We must not doubly make victims of those who were abducted, recruited, used and exposed to violence at an early age.

12. Nevertheless, children are often detained for their alleged association with such groups, exposed to harsh conditions, charged under anti-terrorism laws and faced with capital punishment, in clear violation of article 37 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 2017, in Nigeria alone, authorities detained more than 1,900 children for their or their parents' alleged association with Boko Haram. Children of foreign nationality often face additional protection concerns in detention settings. Even when there is a clear commitment to comply with international juvenile justice principles, judiciaries may be overwhelmed with the caseload and the additional complexity regarding cases pertaining to foreign nationals. That includes complications with regard to age verification, criminal investigations and family tracing. In addition, where psychosocial or educational support is made available, children of foreign nationality may be unable to avail themselves of such services owing to the language barrier. The ongoing global study on children deprived of liberty, called for by the General Assembly in its resolution 69/157, will offer good practices and recommendations aimed at realizing all relevant rights of the child.

13. It is important to ensure accountability for crimes committed during conflict, including those committed by children during their association with armed groups. It is, however, equally important to support justice systems to do so according to international law and juvenile justice standards. In that regard, the international community must redouble its efforts to assist investigative processes, ensure adequate

resources are made available to enable adherence to juvenile justice principles and ensure that consular services are accessible to foreign nationals. Denying children the opportunity to return to their countries of origin, rescinding their nationality or detaining them solely for their alleged association with armed groups runs counter to the best interests of the child and international protection standards.

14. Stepping back from our joint responsibility to find durable and just solutions for children of foreign nationality stranded in conflict zones, regardless of their affiliation, will have a devastating impact on the prospects of building and sustaining peace. Responses that put children at risk of statelessness contravene central tenets of international law[2] and only serve to perpetuate the status quo. The phenomenon of cross-border recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, as well as other violations, therefore requires greater international attention and a coordinated response based firmly on international law and drawing on international child protection standards.

Preventing grave violations against children to build and sustain peace

15. Preventing violations against children affected by armed conflict should be a primary concern of the international community. Failing to assume this collective responsibility not only further endangers the boys and girls living in insecurity, but atrocities perpetrated against children may also amplify grievances between belligerent parties and reduce their ability to overcome conflict in a peaceful manner. More than two decades ago, the General Assembly, in its resolution 51/77, acknowledged that child protection contributes to promoting peace and stressed the importance of fostering an international political commitment to move towards preventing grave violations. Forestalling grave violations, such as sexual violence, child recruitment or abduction, is therefore not only a moral and legal obligation but also an essential factor in building and sustaining peace.

16. In 2016, the Security Council, through resolution 2282 (2016), renewed its commitment to peacebuilding and conflict prevention and called on the Secretary-General to share his views on how the United Nations could strengthen its role in peacebuilding and sustaining peace. The Secretary-General's report on peacebuilding and sustaining peace (A/72/707) presents a series of concrete recommendations to strengthen conflict prevention and work towards sustainable peace, many of which are closely linked to the children and armed conflict mandate.

17. In his annual report on children and armed conflict (A/72/865-S/2018/465), the Secretary-General highlighted that, despite a growing recognition that protecting boys and girls contributes to creating the conditions for lasting peace, children continue to be at the heart of conflicts. He called on the international community to ensure that child protection is made an integral part of any comprehensive strategy to prevent and resolve conflict with a view to enabling sustainable peace. In that regard, the Special Representative advocated the reinforcement of United Nations child protection capacities to better protect children in armed conflict and initiated various initiatives aimed at dovetailing efforts to respond to and prevent violations against children with the broader sustaining peace agenda of the United Nations, as detailed below.

Including child protection issues in peace processes

18. The importance of promoting the ability of the United Nations to prevent violent conflict by placing an emphasis on preventive diplomacy, mediation and good offices

[2] See, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 15); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (art. 24 (3)); and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (art. 7 (1)).

and to give due consideration to child protection issues from the initial stages of peace processes has been reaffirmed in recent United Nations resolutions, including Security Council resolution 2427 (2018) on children and armed conflict. In that regard, Member States, United Nations entities, the Peacebuilding Commission and other concerned parties have been called upon to integrate child protection provisions into all peace negotiations, ceasefire and peace agreements and provisions for ceasefire monitoring. At the open debate on children and armed conflict with the theme "Protecting children today prevents conflicts tomorrow", held by the Security Council on 9 July 2018, Member States reiterated the need to prioritize children's issues in peace processes and fully address their needs during and after armed conflicts in order to contribute to lasting peace.

19. In response to a request by the Security Council in October 2017 (S/PRST/2017/21), the Office of the Special Representative recently initiated a consultative process with child protection and mediation actors in the United Nations system, including the Department of Political Affairs, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and UNICEF, in order to compile lessons learned and best practices and develop practical guidance on the integration of child protection issues in peace processes by December 2019.

20. The documentation and analysis of experiences in integrating child protection issues in peace processes garnered by the Office of the Special Representative and other child protection and mediation actors over the course of the past years will be an important starting point for the development of such guidance. The Special Representative's involvement in the peace talks between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army, focusing on the separation and reintegration of children from the former armed group, as well as her support for field engagement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front commanders and community members in the Philippines to end child recruitment and with armed groups in the Central African Republic following the adoption of the Brazzaville Agreement of July 2014, offer a rich reservoir of knowledge that needs systematic review and analysis.

21. Through the ongoing initiative, the Office of the Special Representative will seek to disseminate knowledge on how peace processes can best be leveraged to advance child protection and promote reintegration and reconciliation objectives in the context of supporting conflict resolution and prevention. The Office will coordinate United Nations-wide efforts to provide adequate support to mediators, negotiators and all those who can influence parties to conflict in the task of ensuring that child protection concerns are addressed in mediation and peace processes. This will not only contribute to promoting children's rights but also to laying a solid foundation for inclusive and sustainable peace. Highlighting the potential benefits of including child protection issues in peace processes and the complementarity of mediation and child protection efforts will be an important enabling factor.

Leveraging the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to prevent grave violations

22. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the children and armed conflict agenda contain several joint objectives that offer important avenues for mutually reinforcing advocacy. Ensuring that special attention is paid to children affected by armed conflict in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals is essential and contributes, for instance, to the ending of abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children (Goal 16), the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers (Goal 8) and access to quality education for children (Goal 4).

23. The complementary relationship was most recently highlighted in Security Council resolution 2427 (2018), which refers to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and recalls the need to focus on combating poverty and inequality in order to protect children from grave violations, particularly in the context of conflict. Multi-stakeholder initiatives such as Alliance 8.7, launched by the International Labour Organization in 2015 to eradicate forced labour, modern slavery, human trafficking and child labour, are important vehicles for leveraging those areas of common ground and advancing the 2030 Agenda and the children and armed conflict agenda.

Ensuring adequate reintegration support for children affected by conflict

24. In a world facing multiple and complex crises, we still struggle to find adequate resources for the short and long-term support of children recovering from the trauma of war. Children formerly associated with armed forces or groups who have been released, self-demobilized or rescued face an uncertain future. If assistance is not forthcoming or is short-lived, those children run the risk of re-recruitment for a lack of alternatives, stigmatization for a lack of reconciliation and condemnation to a life in which survival takes precedence over aspirations for a lack of education. Increasingly, reintegration efforts are also slowed down by the cross-border nature of recruitment and use, as well as by the release of children in places far from their provenance.

25. Providing adequate, sustainable and reliably funded reintegration programmes is essential to ensuring that children affected by war, particularly those associated with parties to conflict, avail themselves of the necessary support to recover their lives and once again become members of their communities. Reintegration support must also be understood to be a crucial tool for preventing conflict. Children who receive targeted and long-term educational and psychosocial support can become agents of positive change and strengthen the grassroots fabric of peace. Increasing our efforts to utilize reintegration to break cycles of violence and address its cross-border nature through increased cooperation will be vital. In the course of the reporting period, the Special Representative has advocated broad-based support for reintegration funding that is sustainable, predictable and long-term. A dedicated project undertaken with UNICEF is determining universal resource needs for reintegration and evaluating potential coordination mechanisms for funding. The results of those efforts are scheduled to be presented during the high-level plenary meeting of the seventy-third session of the General Assembly in September 2018.

Moving towards regional, subregional and national prevention plans

26. Action plans developed with parties that are listed in the annexes of the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict constitute a strong tool for accountability and catalysts for action. That should not, however, preclude the taking of additional measures to prevent grave violations even before discernible patterns of violations emerge. Public awareness and capacity-building aimed at preventing all six grave violations against children should be prioritised in any engagement with parties to conflict. Even when a violation has been contained or conflict subsides, national prevention plans can strengthen the preparedness and capacity of Governments to better protect children from being the first victims of violence. The Government of the Sudan is the first to have initiated the elaboration of a comprehensive national plan to prevent violations against children in situations of armed conflict.

27. Due to the persisting cross-border nature of violations against children, it is imperative that common standards and procedures be developed to prevent the use and abuse of children in, by and for armed conflict. Subregional and regional

prevention plans can be an essential tool for expediting the handover and release of children across borders and for better protecting them from recruitment and use in border areas. Such approaches can also accelerate efforts to reintegrate and reinsert children into society at the time of their release and when they receive comprehensive reintegration assistance.

Building a better understanding of child protection

28. In resolution 72/245, the General Assembly requested the Special Representative to increase her engagement with Member States, United Nations bodies and agencies, regional organizations and, in particular, subregional organizations and to increase public awareness-raising activities, including by collecting, assessing and disseminating best practices and lessons learned. Indeed, gaining a better understanding of challenges rendering children vulnerable in situations of armed conflict is both a central tenet of the mandate and a crucial prerequisite for effective responses.

29. Following a request made by the Security Council on 31 October 2017 (S/PRST/2017/21), the Special Representative initiated, together with relevant child protection actors, a process to compile best practices and lessons learned. Documenting the achievements and challenges of the past 20 years of the implementation of the mandate on children and armed conflict, the exercise is aimed at providing child protection actors on the ground with practical guidance and technical support to inform future action. Events such as the Arria-formula meeting entitled "Ending and preventing grave violations against children through action plans: best practices from African States", which was held on 7 May 2018, and the event organized by the Office of the Special Representative on 6 June on the reintegration of children formerly associated with armed groups and armed forces presented opportunities to exchange experiences and initiate the lessons learned process.

III. Commitments, action plans and dialogue with parties to conflict

A. Upcoming children and armed conflict campaign

30. Building on the momentum of the campaign "Children, Not Soldiers", conducted jointly with UNICEF, and responding to the continuing high levels of verified grave violations committed against children, the Special Representative is preparing the launch of a new campaign during Geneva Peace Week in November 2018 to revitalize the commitment of the international community to better protect children in situations of armed conflict.

31. The campaign is being developed in close consultation with United Nations and civil society partners and is designed to increase understanding of child protection in armed conflict and catalyse action to end and prevent all six grave violations. A further aim will be to enable the development of a set of informational and advocacy tools for use by the broader child protection community, interested Governments and parties to conflict, thereby harnessing collective action to end and prevent such violations.

B. Addressing grave violations by parties to conflict

32. Under the leadership of the Secretary-General and the Special Representative, the reporting period was marked by enhanced engagement with parties to conflict, at headquarters and in the field, which led to the signing of two new action plans to end

and prevent grave violations against children, the delisting of five parties from the annexes of the Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict for specific violations and the adoption of protocols for the release and handover of children in Niger and the Sudan.

33. Sustained United Nations engagement with the Civilian Joint Task Force in Nigeria resulted in the signing of an action plan in September 2017 to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. The group has since taken several steps, including the promulgation of a standing order to refrain from recruiting or using children, the initiation of a process to identify and release children in their ranks and the creation of five child protection units in Borno State to support cooperation with the United Nations at the local level. In the Central African Republic, the Mouvement Patriotique pour la Centrafrique signed an action plan in May 2018 to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence committed against them, as well as attacks on schools and hospitals. The action plan, which covers the four violations for which the Mouvement is listed, is the most comprehensive signed to date.

34. Where technical capacity and support coincided with the political will to implement action plans, important advances were achieved, leading to the delisting of four parties from the annexes of the Secretary-General's annual report for specific grave violations against children. The Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo implemented the provisions of their action plan on ending and preventing the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict and were delisted in October 2017 with regards to that violation. Notwithstanding this important achievement, they have not yet completed the implementation of the provisions on ending and preventing sexual violence against children and remain listed for that violation. Regarding Yemen, following an exchange of letters with the coalition to restore legitimacy in Yemen, the Special Representative sent a technical mission to Riyadh to work with the coalition headquarters to review and improve mechanisms so as to better protect children. A significant improvement in relation to the protection of schools and hospitals, including through the creation of a child protection unit in the coalition headquarters, led to the delisting of the coalition for that violation. Notwithstanding this important achievement, the coalition remains listed for the killing and maiming of children and must continue efforts to prevent child casualties. In the Philippines, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front achieved the majority of benchmarks set out in its action plan prior to the reporting period in early 2017, including the disengagement of 1,869 children, the promulgation of a directive requiring regular self-monitoring and screening of armed elements as well as age-assessment guidelines. The armed group was subsequently delisted in October 2017.

35. In the Sudan, the implementation of the action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the Sudanese Armed Forces was finalized in 2018, following three outstanding measures, including the adoption of standard operating procedures on the release and handover of children associated with armed groups, the adoption of a community-based complaint mechanism to report child recruitment and the initiation of an awareness-raising campaign on all grave violations against children. During her visit to the Sudan in February 2018, the Special Representative advocated the creation of a national prevention plan, which was welcomed by the Government at the open debate on children and armed conflict in July. In Colombia, as postulated in the peace agreement, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army laid down its weapons, transformed itself into a political party and formally released 135 children between September 2016 and August 2017, leading to the delisting of the former armed group.

Strengthening governmental child protection architectures

36. Alongside the delisting of Government forces, important advances were achieved in strengthening national child protection structures through action plans and other commitments. Strengthening accountability mechanisms for grave violations against children was one key vector of action. In Afghanistan, amendments made by the Government to the Criminal Code entered into force in February 2018. It now contains provisions criminalizing the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and the practice of bacha bazi ("dancing boys"). Furthermore, in the reporting period, the establishment of all 34 provincial child protection units in Afghan National Police recruitment centres was finalized. They are mandated to screen out children during recruitment processes and thereby give effect to national legislation on child recruitment. In Somalia, in November 2017, the Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development began work to draft a bill on children's rights, signifying an important step towards the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which the Government ratified in 2015.

37. In other country situations, such as Iraq, Myanmar and Yemen, action plans were revitalized or initial steps were taken to set up the necessary mechanisms for their development and implementation. In Iraq, the Government endorsed a national child protection policy and established a high-level interministerial committee on monitoring and reporting in order to better address grave violations against children. In Myanmar, 49 children were released from the Tatmadaw (Armed Forces) and discussions were held with the Special Representative on how to accelerate the implementation of the action plan to end child recruitment. In Yemen, steps were taken between February and June 2018 to put in place command orders on child protection and revitalize the action plan signed in 2014 between the Government and the United Nations to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. That led to the establishment of a joint technical committee tasked with developing and implementing a roadmap to accelerate the implementation of the Government's child protection commitments. Recent advances included the finalization of a standard operational procedure on the handover and release of children.

Addressing grave violations by armed groups

38. Throughout the reporting period, interactions between the United Nations and a wide range of armed groups on child protection took place in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, the Philippines, South Sudan and the Sudan. Those interactions are a testament to how the children and armed conflict mandate can create political opportunities to engage with otherwise often elusive parties to conflict on child protection issues and generate concrete commitments.

39. Action plans remained a key tool for engaging with armed groups. In Mali, for instance, following the signing in March 2017 by the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad of an action plan to end and prevent grave violations against children, the group established focal points and defined priority activities, including the screening of troops, to identify associated children. In the Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North established an action plan committee and issued a command order prohibiting the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. Similar command orders were also issued by the Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minawi and the Justice and Equality Movement.

40. In Myanmar, the Kachin Independence Army, the Karenni Army, the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, the Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council and the Shan State Army continued to engage with the United Nations on child protection issues with a view to formalizing their commitment to end and prevent the recruitment

and use of children in armed conflict. The Special Representative reiterates her call on the Government of Myanmar to facilitate the signature and implementation of action plans with listed armed groups in order to strengthen the protection of all children in the country.

41. Contact with listed armed groups beyond the remit of action plans also led to important advances. In the Central African Republic, engagement with the Union pour la paix en Centrafrique and the Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique resulted in the promulgation of command orders barring the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict issued in September 2017 and May 2018 respectively. Both armed groups also appointed child protection focal points to further strengthen dialogue with the United Nations and make child protection decisions operational. In South Sudan, the United Nations and the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission conducted several advocacy campaigns for the release of children associated with armed groups. In the first four months of 2018, 518 children, including 182 girls, were released in a first phase by the South Sudan National Liberation Movement and pro-Taban Deng Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition. The Special Representative is encouraged by those commitments, which can be leveraged on the way to obtaining more formal agreements, in particular action plans.

IV. Raising global awareness and mainstreaming

A. Field visits and awareness raising

42. Field visits and participation in international high-level events enabled the Special Representative and her Office to raise global awareness on issues of concern for the protection of children in armed conflict and advocate enhanced national protection mechanisms for children in countries on her agenda. The Special Representative travelled to Colombia in November 2017 to follow up on the implementation of the child protection provisions in the peace agreement and to urge the creation of adequate reintegration services for released children. She returned to Colombia in May 2018 to take part in a lessons-learned and best practices event on the prevention of child recruitment and the protection of children affected by armed conflict, organized jointly by the United Nations and the Government.

43. In February and March 2018, the Special Representative visited the Sudan, where she discussed the implementation of the action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict with the authorities. She noted progress, notably the provision of access to military barracks for joint Government-United Nations monitoring and verification missions. The visit made it possible to identify remaining steps required to complete the action plan and reach agreement on immediate priorities and, thereafter, on accelerating final implementation. The Special Representative remains engaged with the Sudanese authorities, especially with regard to developing a national prevention plan focused on a broad range of child protection issues.

44. In May 2018, the Special Representative travelled to Myanmar to ascertain the level of implementation of the action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the Tatmadaw and held constructive discussions with the Government, including on the completion of the existing action plan, the expeditious passage of the draft child law and the inclusion of child protection issues in the ongoing peace dialogue. She also advocated that the United Nations be afforded immediate and unrestricted access, in particular to Rakhine State, in order to document violations against children following the mass exodus of the Rohingya population to

Bangladesh. The Government assured her that access would be granted and a United Nations monitoring mission to the region is being planned. The high-level visit followed a technical mission by a specialized team of monitors to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, in November 2017, which was dispatched to document and verify alleged grave violations against children in the wake of the August 2017 violence in northern Rakhine.

45. As the leading United Nations advocate for the protection of conflict-affected children, the Special Representative travelled to Geneva in March 2018 to participate in the interactive dialogue on children and armed conflict and sit as a panel member at a side event on the Safe Schools Declaration, advocating better protection of education in situations of armed conflict. Earlier that month, she was invited to speak about children and armed conflict at the tenth session of the Global Child Forum in Stockholm, an opportunity to highlight the importance of including the voices of children in the development of protection mechanisms and prevention plans.

46. The displacement of children as a result of armed conflict has been a key focus for the Special Representative throughout the reporting period. She travelled to Geneva and Malta in March, May and July 2018 to meet representatives of United Nations agencies and Member States, including the President of Malta, of international and regional organizations, including the European Union, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Discussions focused on reinforcing joint efforts to address gaps between policy and practice regarding the issue of children on the move, including unaccompanied children.

B. Working with regional and subregional organizations

47. Regional and subregional actors have an essential role to play in multiplying child protection efforts, including by embedding international policies in regional agreements and commitments. They are also well placed to respond to the cross-border nature of grave violations and address the growing number of unaccompanied children on the move. Given the role those actors can play in putting child protection into effect, the Special Representative recently initiated or renewed exchanges with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Economic Community of West African States, the Economic Community of Central African States and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development. Opportunities for similar engagement in the Middle East and North Africa region are also under way.

African Union

48. The Special Representative further deepened her engagement with the African Union, including in collaboration with the Special Adviser on Africa. In October 2017, the Special Representative participated in the eighth High-level Retreat on the Promotion of Peace, Security and Stability of the African Union, which was hosted by Chad in N'Djamena. Participants focused on multilateral cooperation and partnerships for peace and stability in Africa. The Special Representative highlighted the need for strengthened collective action by Member States and other partners to end and prevent grave violations against children in Africa. Engagement with the African Union, closely involving UNICEF, also facilitated the appointment of a senior child protection adviser by the African Union in January 2018, further strengthening the regional child protection architecture.

European Union

49. The strong partnership between the Special Representative and the European Union continued throughout the reporting period. In December 2017, representatives

of her Office and the European External Action Service met in Brussels and, in May 2018, the Special Representative addressed the Heads of Mission of the European Union to the United Nations in New York. On both occasions, discussions were held on ways of deepening cooperation between the European Union and the Office, including through the establishment in Brussels of a children and armed conflict liaison office to improve communications and outreach and boost fundraising efforts for child protection programming.

Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel

50. The Special Representative engaged with the Government of Burkina Faso and other Member States and relevant stakeholders to advocate the inclusion of provisions focused on the protection of children in armed conflict in the operationalization of the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel, as well as the appointment of a child protection adviser. The Office of the Special Representative contributed to the Joint Force's international humanitarian law and human rights compliance framework and participated in a workshop held in Bamako on the provision of technical expertise to include child protection provisions in the framework.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

51. The Office of the Special Representative continued to work with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to strengthen its child protection architecture. In September 2017, the Office participated in the first training session on children and armed conflict for NATO focal points, which was held in Izmir, Turkey. It was focused on the legal basis of the six grave violations against children. In December 2017, in Kabul, opportunities for deepening cooperation between the Resolute Support Mission and the United Nations in Afghanistan were discussed with the NATO Senior Child Protection Adviser. The Special Representative also supported the development of scenario-based training on children and armed conflict initiated by NATO. The Special Representative and her Office also worked with the Senior NATO Focal Point on Children and Armed Conflict on steps to deepen the mainstreaming of child protection, as initiated in the paper entitled "The Protection of Children in Armed Conflict — Way Forward", which was approved by the North Atlantic Council in 2015.

C. Building support with civil society

52. Building bridges with civil society organizations and academia on the issue of conflict-affected children remained a priority. The Special Representative participated in several events organized by international NGOs, including as a keynote speaker at the high-level event "OPAC turns 18" on 21 February, which was co-organized by Child Soldiers International. She also supported the participation of civil society spokesperson Yenny Londoño as a briefer at the open debate on children and armed conflict, held in the Security Council on 9 July.

53. The Special Representative and her Office held consultations with NGOs on the upcoming global campaign on children and armed conflict. The Special Representative doubled the number of annual briefings with New York-based organizations to exchange information on challenges and opportunities regarding the protection of children and explore ways to better promote areas of common interest. She also held collective meetings with specialized NGOs in Brussels, Geneva and London and remote briefings with Member States and civil society organizations, including for the event "How to better protect children in armed conflict", which was held in February 2018 by Save the Children International in Munich, Germany.

D. Building support on partnerships with United Nations mechanisms and international organizations

54. The Special Representative continued to leverage her role as a key advocate for children's rights to foster international cooperation with a view to improving the protection of children. In that regard, the Special Representative, in cooperation with the Permanent Mission of Sweden to the United Nations, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and UNICEF, held a side event on 19 September 2017, in the course of the seventy-second session of the General Assembly, to highlight the unique role of child protection actors in conflict situations. Member States expressed their support for the mandate and underlined the importance of maintaining child protection capacity in peace operations.

55. The Special Representative also worked intensively with the Security Council. On 9 July 2018, she briefed the Council during its open debate on children and armed conflict and presented the Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict. Representatives of 89 Member States addressed the meeting, overwhelmingly expressing their support for the mandate and underlining the crucial role of child protection in sustaining peace. On the same day, the Security Council adopted resolution 2427 (2018), in which it reaffirmed the importance of the Special Representative's role in contributing to conflict prevention. During the reporting period, the Special Representative briefed the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict on specific country situations, issued country reports on Myanmar, Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, briefed the Security Council on the situation of children and armed conflict in the Kasais (July 2017), the Sudan (March 2018) and the Syrian Arab Republic (July 2018) and provided the sanctions committees with information regarding the six grave violations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan. Her Office also helped to prepare the visit of the Working Group to the Sudan, which took place from 26 to 29 November 2017.

56. Regular communication with the Human Rights Council to raise awareness and address violations of the rights of children in situations of conflict continued during the reporting period. On 6 March, the Special Representative presented her annual report to the Council, informing it about denial of humanitarian access and trafficking and setting forth her vision on how to increase awareness of and action regarding the six grave violations against children. Her Office continued to support universal periodic review processes by providing information on the six grave violations and progress made in the countries on her agenda. Dialogue with the Committee on the Rights of the Child continued on enhancing the sharing of information and efforts to implement more strictly the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its optional protocols. To that end, the Special Representative held bilateral meetings with Member States and briefed regional organizations, civil society and regional groups. During the reporting period, the Central African Republic ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, bringing the total number of States parties to 167.

57. The Special Representative also continued her engagement with other United Nations entities, including UNICEF, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Department of Political Affairs, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and strengthened outreach with the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children and Sexual Violence in Conflict.

58. Cross-cutting issues relevant to the children and armed conflict mandate remained an important entry point for mainstreaming child protection concerns. In that regard, the Special Representative continued to treat the issue of sexual

exploitation and abuse by United Nations peacekeepers as a matter of priority, including by regularly engaging with the high-level steering group and the Victims' Rights Advocate. The Special Representative also co-convened two informal meetings on the issue of foreign fighters and their families with a broad range of United Nations actors and her Office held discussions on the denial of humanitarian access and ways of holding its perpetrators to account.

59. Initiatives by Member States continued to provide key opportunities for advocating better protection of children in armed conflict. In that regard, the Special Representative underscored, in various forums, the importance of enabling unimpeded access to education by better protecting schools, schoolchildren and teachers. Notably, she called on Member States to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration during her speech at an Arria-formula meeting on the issue of attacks on schools, which was organized by France, Italy, Sweden and Uruguay and held in October 2017 in the Security Council, at the launch in May 2018 of the report by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack entitled "Education under Attack" and at the side event on "Harnessing the power of quality education to prevent violent extremism", which was organized by Belgium, Qatar and the Education Above All Foundation on the margins of the High-level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States under the theme of "Strengthening international cooperation to combat the evolving threat of terrorism", which was held on 28 and 29 June 2018. The Special Representative continued to encourage Member States to endorse the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (the Paris Principles) and her Office, as an active member of the Paris Principles steering group, continued to support their implementation. The Office also supported the development of the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers, which were adopted by 65 Member States at the United Nations Peacekeeping Defence Ministerial conference, which was held on 14 and 15 November 2017 in Vancouver, Canada. The principles are a key means of prioritizing and further implementing child protection in the framework of United Nations peacekeeping operations.

V. Recommendations

60. **The Special Representative calls upon Member States to protect children caught up in conflict in line with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law, particularly in the context of countering terrorism and violent extremism.**

61. **In view of the continuing high levels of cross-border recruitment and the subsequent challenges in terms of the repatriation and reintegration of children separated from armed forces or groups, the Special Representative calls upon Member States and regional and subregional organizations to engage closely with the United Nations to ensure a coordinated response based on international law and in the best interests of the child.**

62. **The Special Representative expresses her concern regarding the deprivation of liberty of children, including those of foreign nationality, for their alleged association with armed forces or groups and calls upon Member States to respect their primary status as victims and prioritize alternatives to detention focused on averting further stigmatisation and enabling their rehabilitation and reintegration and to use detention only as a last resort and for the shortest possible period of time.**

63. **The Special Representative recalls the importance of fostering international political commitment to move towards preventing grave violations**

against children. In that regard, she encourages Member States and regional and subregional organizations to engage with the United Nations to support efforts led by her Office, including the elaboration of prevention plans aimed at systematizing preventive measures, and the collection, assessment and dissemination of best practices and lessons learned on children and armed conflict.

64. **With a view to supporting the broader prevention efforts of the United Nations, the Special Representative emphasizes the importance of ensuring appropriate child protection capacity in situations on the children and armed conflict agenda, reminds Member States that the reintegration of children is crucial to ensuring the sustainability of peace and security and calls upon members of the General Assembly to provide the political, technical and financial support necessary for such efforts.**

65. **Recalling that a strong focus is needed on combating poverty and inequality in order to prevent grave violations and protect children from them, particularly in the context of conflict, the Special Representative calls upon the General Assembly to ensure that special attention is paid to children affected by armed conflict in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.**

66. **The Special Representative urges Member States that have not done so to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and to enact effective national legislation and policies to criminalize the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups.**